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Reiter, Florian C.: *Man, Nature and the Infinite: The Scope of Taoist Thunder Magic Rituals*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013, 178 pp., ISBN 978-3-4470-6904-5.

This book sheds light upon the content and nature of an important form of Taoist ritual known as Thunder Magic (*lei-fa* 雷法). It focuses primarily on the 90th, 91st and 92nd chapters (*chüan* 卷) of the massive fifteenth–sixteenth century ritual compendium, the *Tao-fa hui-yüan* 道法會元 (*A Corpus of Taoist Rituals*). These chapters are entitled respectively *Hsien-t'ien i-ch'i lei-fa* 先天一氣雷法 (*Thunder Rituals of the One Breath of the Anterior Heaven*; ch. 90), *Lei-t'ing Liu-i T'ien-hsi Shih-che ch'i-tao ta-fa* 雷霆六乙天喜使者祈禱大法 (*Great Rituals and Prayers of the Emissary Joy of Heaven and the Six I of Thunder and Thunderclaps*; ch. 91) and *Hsien-t'ien Liu-i T'ien-hsi Shih-che ta-fa* 先天六一天喜使者大法 (*Great Rituals of the Emissary Joy of Heaven and the Six I of Anterior Heaven*; ch. 92). Each of these chapters describe in detail ritual methods involving the invoking of thunder deities and the writing of talismans (*fu* 符; or “amulets” as rendered by Reiter). Reiter speculates that the three chapters perhaps represent different local traditions that emerged around the thirteenth century. Nonetheless, as he points out, their methods share certain common features and likely derive in significant part from the tradition of the famous Northern Song Taoist ritual master Wang Wen-ch'ing 王文卿 (1093–1153), who at the height of his career enjoyed the trust and patronage of Emperor Hui-tsung 徽宗 (r. 1100–1126).

As for why he chose to focus on these particular chapters of the *Tao-fa hui-yüan*, Reiter explains in his Foreword, “The materials are useful to illustrate the scope of Taoist exorcism and also to reveal the grand design of integration that relates man, nature, and the infinite.” (p. IX) In his Introduction Reiter states, “We want to understand and describe how man, nature and the infinite found expression in the Thunder rituals that Wang Wen-ch'ing and his followers worked out and documented.” (p. 3) In other words, his aim seems to be to provide a detailed description of what the performance of Thunder rituals in the tradition of Wang Wen-ch'ing entailed, and to understand the rationale by which these procedures were meant to enable the priest (man) to invoke, embody and employ supernatural or transcendent forces (the infinite) in a way that brings about desirable effects upon the world (nature).

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The reader indeed gets very detailed descriptions of Thunder Magic in this book. This is because the bulk of Reiter's exposition bears the format of what he calls "annotated translation" wherein "The informative texts speak for themselves, and we add only occasionally some explanatory remarks if we think that they may be helpful for the reader." In other words, rather than a descriptive summary and analysis of chapters 90–92 of the *Tao-fa hui-yüan*, the reader is provided with a more or less full translation of the three chapters, with a (disappointingly) limited amount of clarification and analysis.

The rich data of chapters 90–92 (presented consecutively in Parts II, III and IV of Reiter's book) is further supplemented by "annotated translations" of sections from other chapters of the *Tao-fa hui-yüan*. So as to provide a more comprehensive picture of the pantheon of deities that Thunder Magic practitioners could invoke, Reiter translates, in Part I of his book, a section entitled *Lei-t'ing fen-ssu* 雷霆分司 (*Arrangement of the Offices of Thunder and Thunderclaps*; *Tao-fa hui-yüan* 67/3b–5a). In Part V are translations of passages from *Lei-t'ing chien-sha nien-yüeh shu-chi* 雷霆箭煞年月樞機 (*The Killing Arrows of Thunder and Thunderclaps of the Pivot and Moving Force of [the Cycle of] Years and Months*; ch. 129) and *Chih-chou* 敕咒 (*Decree and Spell*; ch. 61) that pertain to the desirable timing and location of rituals, based upon considerations related to astronomy, and to directional and calendrical rubrics. In Part VI is a translation of an essay by Chang Shan-yüan 張善淵 (fl. 1280–1294) entitled *Lei-t'ing hsüan-lun* 雷霆玄論 (*Discussions of the Dark Mysteries of the Thunder and Thunderclaps*; *Tao-fa hui-yüan* 67/1a–11a), which discusses the workings of the cosmos and how the priest is to cultivate his microcosmic body in meditation (internal alchemical) so as to enable himself to write the powerful talismans.

The book concludes with Part VII, which tabulates and compares the data in *Tao-fa hui-yüan*, chs. 90–92 and discusses the notable similarities and differences between the three chapters. It provides a table that displays the names of deities, spells, talismans and ritual applications mentioned in the respective chapters. Reiter notes that the only deity mentioned in common by all three chapters is Chang Chüeh 張珪, the "leading general" (*chu-chiang* 主將) among the thunder deities to be invoked (the priest, by means of meditative visualization experiences himself transforming into this deity that is to be his alter-ego). The one talisman mentioned in common by all three chapters – and hence apparently the most crucial one – is the *Shih-che pen-shen fu* 使者本身符 ("Amulet of the Emissary") that embodies Chang Chüeh and his troops, and which the priest employs in dispatching them. The spells shared in common by the three chapters are the *Shih-liu-tzu hsin-chang* 十六字心章 (*Heart Stanza in Sixteen Characters*), *Yün-hsing-lei chou* 運興雷咒 (*Spell to Invoke the Thunders*) and *Shih-chiang chou* 誓將咒. The three chapters indicate that the main purposes

to which the rituals are applied pertain to the favorable alteration of weather conditions (most typically praying for rain or for clear skies, but also for “Hiding the Sun” [*yen-jih* 掩日] and “Redirecting the Wind” [*hui-feng* 回風]), and to the exorcism (*sha-fa* 煞伐; “killing and attacking” [translated by Reiter as “*Killing and Crusading*”]) of evil spirits that cause diseases and disasters, and that sometimes are worshipped in temples that deserve to be destroyed (doing this is referred to as *ta-miao* 打廟 [“*Smashing (Wicked) Temples*”]).

In the “Concluding Observations” (pp. 163–164) at the end of Part VII, Reiter nicely summarizes the basic premises of Thunder Magic according to which the priest is understood to be able to invoke divine forces and bring forth favorable results in the world we live in. He observes, “The scope of the Thunder rituals pertains to the management of nature that the microcosmos of the human body mirrors and realizes. Naturally, the cosmic divinities are also at home in the body of the priest who has the privilege to know them by name and to face them on an equal rank once he transformed himself into this or that individual divinity to perform the respective Thunder ritual.” (p. 163) He then points out that the key to success in this endeavor is seen to lie in the priest’s self-cultivation (meditation in particular) that renders him sufficiently divine (or at least temporarily so) as to enable him to communicate with and command spirits. He also points out that the production of the talismans (“Thunder amulets”) is the key component among all the ritual actions.

While the study thus concludes nicely with observations that succinctly highlight the most definitive features of Thunder Magic, one does wish that Reiter could have provided the reader with more of such clarification and guidance within the body of the study. Also, it would have been desirable to see in the book’s Introduction a properly thorough discussion of how and when Thunder Magic originated, what distinguishes it from other major forms of Taoist ritual, and why it rose to prominence when it did (eleventh century), and not before. The data presented in the lengthy translations – rich and fascinating though it certainly is – is very dense, opaque and often redundant. The occasional comments added to the passages do not adequately highlight, sort out and explain the data in the translation. Also both the comments and the translations suffer from poor English grammar and questionable choices for rendering words into English (“crusading” for *fa* 伐 [attacking, raiding] being a primary example). For those of us who can read Classical Chinese and possess some prior understanding of Taoism, it seems as though it might be easier to just read the *Tao-fa hui-yüan* in Chinese. I am, however, grateful to Reiter for identifying and directing us to portions of the massive ritual compendium that are particularly helpful in providing a good understanding of the most definitive features of Thunder Magic.

I do believe that full English translations of this material can be very important and useful, especially for scholars within the field of Comparative Religion (or Ritual Studies more specifically) who cannot read Chinese. Priestly ritual is a component of religion that Taoism – as much or more than any other religion in the world – has developed in elaborate and unique ways. Thunder Magic of the sort studied in this book is perhaps one of the best examples anywhere of how humans have speculated in depth upon their relationship to the supernatural and natural worlds, and thereby devised creative strategies to better their condition. I thus commend Florian Reiter's efforts to bring this data to wider attention.